

# A TRANSACTION IN SEWING MACHINES

By  
Earl Derr Biggers

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**N**O, sir," said Mr. Peter Powers firmly, "I don't believe in mixin' things. Everythin' in the world's mixed now. You see joy an' sorrow, happiness an' marriage, or some other trouble, graftin' an' church-goin', all marchin' hand in hand. It ain't right, I say, an' I make it a rule never to mix nothin'. That's why I've said 'beer' every one o' the five times you've asked me to have a drink, an' that's why I'd go on sayin' 'beer' if you was to ask me five hundred more times."

I nodded to the waiter, and Mr. Powers smiled generally.

"Generosity," he continued, "is your strong point, an' that's how you come to remind me o' George Barber. George was the mos' generous man I ever see, though you're a close second, an' who knows but you'll beat him out in the end? Every pay-day George acted more an' more like Carnegie, only he

ested he fergot the liquid refreshments. Well, we set down, an' George took up his sad, sad story.

"Six months ago," he says, "I was a happy man—first mate of a tramp steamer carryin' bananas between a lot o' little South American republics an' New York. Then one day a rich general down there in the tropic climes got the idee that he ought to be president o' the pink spot on the map called his country. He an' our captain met; money talked, as is its habit, an' when next we left New York it was with ten thousand rifles stowed away below, in the name o' liberty as represented by the general. Everything had been arranged by his agents; all we did was to take the boxes from a shady wharf on a dark night an' hide 'em away from anxious eyes. So we steamed South, to aid an' abet a Humpty-Dumpty president at havin' a great fall."

"But he didn't. Oh, it's a sad tale. We anchored two miles up a forsaken, smelly river one moonlight night, an' saw the ragged army o' tyrant stranglers

erous. Them sewin'-machines—a thousand o' 'em—are on board this yacht. In a evil minute, urged on by my kindness o' heart an' a offer of a third what I get fer 'em, I agreed to come up here in the general's desire on board a yacht. Why, George, they'll flock here like—like birds. We'll be hailed as public benefactors. They'll build us a statue at the mouth o' this harbor!"

"Under water," growls George.

"You wait an' see," I tells him.

George waited, an' he saw. I wish I could describe the scene that followed. If I had one more drink mebbe I could. Thank you—much obliged.

The first trip the waterman made he brought five women, an' pretty soon lady shoppers was thicker on that deck than in a department store the day before Christmas.

George got out some of the machines, an' some o' the ladies who had brought along implements fer sewin' set down an' sewed, accordin' to George's orders in the ads. You won't guess what a pretty scene it made, with the ladies talkin' blue streak, an' the machines a-buzzin', an' George's head buzzin' too, because o' the questions they asked.

One by one they came an' ordered an' went away.

I could hear George sayin': "Yes'm, pay on delivery to-night," an' then he'd come over to where I was sittin' by the rail an' punch me like he was ringin' up the sale on a cash register, an' shriek low fer joy.

"Another gone," he'd say; "Peter, this is your work, God bless you!"

It began to get late, an' the crowd thinned out.

They was just five left, the old lady with the green specs, an' old maid who wouldn't have been satisfied with a solid gold machine set with diamonds, a butcher's wife whose social standin' wouldn't allow her to buy nothin' inferior, an' two young married women who couldn't decide. George comes over to me.

"Two hundred and eighty-three sold!" he says. "If you'd a told me yesterday such luck was waitin' for me, I'd a jammed the lie down your throat. Tonight I'll be a rich man. Two hundred and eighty-three, an' mebbe some more."

"Yes, mebbe some more," I says, "fer here comes the waterman with another customer."

George smiled and says: "That's good," an' turned to look at the waterman's skiff, not a hundred yards away. Then his face went white an' he trembled all over. At that minute the waterman's passenger, a tall, homely woman, stood up in the stern o' the boat an' made some remarks, emphazin' her words by wavin' a umbrella vigorously.

"Good Lord!" says George in a broken voice, "she's seen me."

"Well, why not?" says I, surprised.

"Why not?" shrieked George. "Why not, you fool? She's my wife, that's why not."

"You never told me," I says sadly.

"This ain't no time fer family history," he says, an' rushes below. I followed. The engineer was right there, but George didn't notice him. He started the yacht himself.

"Look here," I hollered, "they's five women aboard this boat what belong ashore. Are you mad, George?"

"No," says George, "I'm doin' the only same thing, as you'd know if you'd ever met my wife. Eight years ago I left her, an' she's been after me ever since. Once she gets me, I'm a goner. I was a fool fer comin' to this town, she used to live here when she was a girl. Go up on the bridge an' keep her headed to sea, Jim," he says to one o' the men.

"Where are we goin'?" I asks.

"Siberia, Hindooostan, Algiers, anywhere," says George, "anywhere, I ain't sure where," he says. "I only know we're goin' an' we're goin' quick."

"Well, put on your armor," I says, "an' we'll go on deck."

I think I'll need another drink to describe the scene that met our eyes there. Thanks! Have you ever faced five cryin'-mad women you've just kidnapped? No? Well, I guess they ain't no use tryin' to give you any idee o' the way they acted,



PUT UP THE SIGNBOARD WHERE THEY COULDN'T HELP BEIN' SEEN.

never wasted no money on books. It was a real pleasure to sit near him in a cafe, with a good spy waiter close at hand. Yes, sir, you remind me o' George in a good many ways. He didn't have a very intelligent face, but he knew enough not to have heart failure whenever the waiter brought the checks."

He drank.

"It's long since I seen poor George," he went on, feelingly, "three long years since the time him an' I tried to get rid o' a thousand sewin'-machines that had come into our lives accidental like. Unusual machines they was, too, always causin' trouble, an' before we got 'em off our hands we'd kidnapped the female population o' a little New England town. Mebbe you'll like to hear about it?"

I consulted my pocket, and again nodded to the waiter. With this slight encouragement Mr. Powers began:

On one of the big North River docks in New York I struck old George Barber, always so jolly an' gay; an' the look in his eyes was sad, an' his smile o' greeting was the kind that does service at funerals.

"I'm in trouble, Peter," he says to me, low an' tearful.

"I'm sorry, George," says I, with the true ring in my voice; for I thought he was broke, an' to meet the most generous man you know an' find he has no money is the most mutual sorrow there is.

"See that fancy yacht?" he says, pointing to the harbor. An' there, right in among the dirty tugs an' tramp steamers an' the like, was the prettiest little boat afloat. Her brasses an' awinin' was flashed in the sun, an' she was puffin' an' snortin' an' turnin' up her nose at the craft around her fer all the world like Mrs. Van Dusen visitin' the poorhouse.

"Ain't she the beauty?" I remarks.

George sighed. "I'm in command," he says.

I started to congratulate him, but he got behind the post he'd been leanin' against and held up his hand.

"Don't," says he. "That would be the last straw. On board that there yacht is the cause o' all my worry. Peter Powers, if you'd told me when last we met that my generosity an' kind nature was goin' to get me in all this trouble, I'd a turned different on the spot."

"I'm glad I didn't, then," I says heartily.

"Yes," he answers, "I suppose it was better to let me live in ignorance. But it was a awful blow when he fell." He leans toward me. "Come on board," he whispers like the villain in the show, "we might be heard here. Come, an' I'll tell you the story o' my life."

We was rowed out to the yacht, an' once in the cabin I was pleased to see that George was himself again, for I had only just set down when he put some bottles an' glasses on the table. That was George—that was the secret o' his generosity. The trouble he was in, the story he had to tell—or the one someone else was tellin'—never got him so inter-

ested he fergot the liquid refreshments. Well, we set down, an' George took up his sad, sad story.

"Sometimes when I can afford it I'm goin' to take a day off an' spank this seat o' war. It's muddy here, he goes on, an' I don't like the cries o' the birds an' the sun, nor the wild wet breeze comin' up from the swamp. I believe I'm catchin' cold. I'm goin' back on board."

"The general gr'be him. The rifles?" he says.

"I'm sorry," says Murry, who'd got most of his pay for the job before startin' in; "I'm very sorry, but someone else probably has 'em now. An' it wouldn't be safe to inquire. Keep the machines," he says, "they'll come in handy round the camp. Some rainy day when it's too wet to fight let the men stay at home an' do little dressmakin'. They need new clothes," he says.

"Two minutes' thinkin' convinced the general that revolutions was too expensive just then, an' that he'd better wait till they was cheaper. He tells his army to go home, an' forget it, in a ther'l-be-no-war-tonight speech. We took him an' the machines to the capital city, where he got back his job of Secretary o' War, with no questions asked. He's there now, quietly waitin' fer chance to shoot the president under the table at a cabinet meeting."

That, sir, is the story George had to tell, and as he stopped to fill my glass I says to him: "George," says I, "George, what has all this to do with you an' your trouble?"

"My trouble," says George, "is that I'm too gen-

erous. Them sewin'-machines—a thousand o' 'em—are on board this yacht. In a evil minute, urged on by my kindness o' heart an' a offer of a third what I get fer 'em, I agreed to come up here in the general's desire on board a yacht. Why, George, they'll flock here like—like birds. We'll be hailed as public benefactors. They'll build us a statue at the mouth o' this harbor!"

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"Your wife can't follow you here," I says, "an' I can't listen to this commotion much longer an' stay in my right mind. Why not stop an' put these women ashore in a boat. They can walk back to Grimporth before midnight."

George said it was the best plan, an' he told the ladies so. As he was linin' up the weepin' crowd ready to lower 'em into the ship's boat, his generosity came to the front again.

"I've caused you some inconvenience, ladies," he says, "no, you can't deny it—don't try. So I'm goin' to make each one o' you a nice little present. With each lady put ashore goes one o' our latest-model, light-runnin' sewin'-machines. When I'm far away—an' I'll be as far away as I can get, you can bet on that," he says, thinkin' o' his wife, "you can look at the machines an' remember George Barber, the man that carried you away by accident—"

"Cut it out," says the butcher's wife; "it's gettin' late."

So the crew put 'em ashore in the boat, an' followed 'em with five o' our best machines. They made a pretty picture, standin' on the sand, each one beside a sewin'-machine, an' utterin' female curses on George's head. We steamed away, an' George said it almost broke his heart to leave 'em. But I reminded him o' his wife, an' he was comforted.

We'd gone about a quarter o' a mile when George came rushin' to me, a glass in his hand. "Peter," he says, "bad luck don't come single. They've got us now, or my name ain't George Barber."

"Who's got us?" I asked, "the ladies?"

"The law," whispers George in hoarse tones, "the law." An' he points with shakin' finger toward a revenue cutter speedin' along through the dusk, blowin' bushels o' smoke from its funnels, an' throwin' its searchlight, like some evil eye, over the waters.

"It's been nothin' but trouble, trouble," says George sadly, "ever since I took charge o' these blamed machines. An' now it's six years hard labor fer us all." He fell over a machine, an' instead o' swearin', stops to think. "They's one way out," he says, excited like; "they's one way to save us yet." An' he picks up a machine an' throws it overboard. "Call the crew," he shouts; "this is the only way." We all got to work, not relishing George's picture o' prison stripes, an' pretty soon we'd thrown seven hundred and twelve perfectly good sewin'-machines into the deep blue sea.

The cutter comes nearer an' nearer. George finds it harder an' harder to breathe. Then she turns her light on us fer a second—just a contemptuous glance in passin'—an' flashes by.

George's face was a sight to see, even in the dusk. "They never stopped," he says softly; "they never stopped."

"That's clear," says I; "they went by."

"Fifty thousand dollars' worth o' sewin'-machines," he murmurs, "thrown to the mermaids."

"It's a shame," says I; "but the mermaids need—"

"A third o' the money mine," he goes on, "an' a exitable general waitin' in South America fer his share."

"What's the answer